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Failure of Nicaragua Regretted Hidden Role in Bay of Pigs

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Throughout his lifetime, Luis Somoza had scarcely one pleasant, complimentary thing written or spoken of him in the United States.

Yet he was a warm, congenial man and during his one term in office, Nicaragua did move ahead. Of that, little note was taken here. His government was condemned out-of-hand as a "dicta-

torship," though it possessed none of the stigmata of same.

Then when he died, much too young, the obituary notes were not only brief but sterile. Wholly missed was the story of his part in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and no man ever regretted anything more.

It was on Feb. 2, 1962, that he sent word to the Grand Hotel in Managua that he had to see me. That was just before he left the presidency. Then he told his story

like a man confessing. He said he thought people had a right to know, an attitude in marked contrast with that of official Washington. The words are set down verbatim as he said them, though there is much more that could be quoted in this space.

"I am as responsible for that disaster as is your President Kennedy. I mean I share the burden of guilt with him. He made the main mistakes. My blunder is that I did not turn the whole thing

off when I knew that we were going fatally wrong. I had the power. You see, I was the coordinator from this end; the show was being staged from our soil. I am not a technician of war. But I know enough to see when technicians are either lacking or mistaken.

"During the time when we were building up to it, I took assurances from the wrong people—your people—CIA agents—charged to deal with me. I thought

that on operational matters, they spoke for your government. You had carriers off our coast, covering what we were doing. When I asked: 'Will they be prepared to support the invasion in an emergency?' I was told: 'Certainly.' And I believe it. I did not realize that this was not the White House speaking.

"I was in on the scheme from the beginning. There was need of a base from where we could stage the air strikes against Cuba in

secret. You know Puerto Cabezas (population 500) on our east coast, having been there. That was the nerve center. I went to the people there 70 days before the show. I said: 'Here is our chance to do something for democracy in America, but you will have to make sacrifices.' They were willing. So for two months they were cut off from the world; no mail or freight moved in or out. No one could leave; security guards saw to that. One pregnant woman

had to see a specialist in Managua. I sent him to her in my plane; that's how careful we were. We wanted success, and I foolishly thought we had it made.

"There were to be three air strikes out of Puerto Cabezas, timed exactly to help the amphibious landing in the critical hour. The purpose was clear enough—to knock out the Cuban Air Force as the expedition clawed its way ashore and, while it was solidifying the beachhead. Whether we had enough bombers and air crew to be sure of so doing, I had no way of judging, and besides, that was not my problem.

CIA Advances Schedule

"Well, just before the curtain was to go up, I got a call from Washington. This was on Thursday. The call was from CIA. I was told, 'We are moving up the first two strikes 24 hours; they will go on Saturday instead of on Sunday.' I simply could not believe what I heard. So I protested with all of the force I could muster. Not being a military man, I still knew what the chance meant. The two air strikes and the amphibious landing would be 48 hours apart, time enough to answer. So I had a battle with

my conscience and it lost. My brother, Tacho, who commands our forces, was not at hand to advise me. He had been sent on a mission to Formosa, as part of the cover plan.

"Why was the plan changed? I was never told. No one who knew ever tried to talk to me about it. My guilt comes of the fact that knowing we were going on to a catastrophe, and knowing that men would die for no good end in the course of it, I still did not call the whole thing off when I had the power to do so. The only assumption possible for me is that President Kennedy changed the plan to test out national sentiment as revealed by the Sunday newspapers, though none of us will ever know for sure. Then after the first two strikes were reset, dooming the expedition, the third strike was cancelled wholly. Why? Because either the man in the White House or your man in U.N. or both, chickened out. And put me on the list of individuals who chickened out. I have no excuse for myself.

Defeated and Shamed

"In the end we were directly defeated and shamed by these mistakes, though there were others. The two strikes missed three fighter planes. We had two communications ships close to the Bay of Pigs—here was the brain of the operation. The fighters went after them. We also had a U.S. carrier marking time 70 kilometers away from the beachhead. My people had put Nicaraguan panels and symbols aboard that carrier in case of need; I had witnessed it. So I called up Washington and begged that your carrier air power be loosed to stop those three pursuit planes. The carrier was so far out that no one would have known the difference. But Washington said flatly no and that was what killed us before we were fairly started—the three pursuit planes."

There is much more to the interview, but that is enough for the purpose at hand. Luis Somoza had tried hard in an effort to cooperate with the United States in an undertaking that so changed the course of our history that why we are in Vietnam cannot be explained without being honest with ourselves about why the Bay of Pigs is something we would rather forget. He was bunked and hornswoggled by our public servants. So let us all get together and damn him; there rests, possibly, a bad man.

Somoza, Luis